DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 237 284 RC 014 457

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TITLE	Report of Rural Education Advisory Committee.
INSTITUTION	Northwest Regional Educational Lab., Portland, Oreg.
SPONS AGENCY	National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	Sep 83
CONTRACT	400-80-0105
NOTE	19p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research/Technical (143)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Administrator Role; Definitions; Educational Finance; Educational Quality; Educational Research; *Educational Resources; Information Needs; Population Trends; Relationship; *Research Needs; Rural Areas; *Rural Education; *Rural Urban Differences; *Teacher Education; Teachers
IDENTIFIERS	*Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

ABSTRACT

Out of concern that agencies with the power and ability to provide much-needed research and development resources to help solve rural education problems will likely put their efforts into solving more visible urban problems, the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory's Rural Education Advisory committee met in 1983 to justify the need for specific and individual research and development attention for rural schools. The committee defined rural schools as being outside the regular service boundaries of metropolitan areas; averaging no more than one classroom per grade level per school site; being geographically isolated; and being defined by state law as rural, remote, isolated, or small. The committee's rationale for research and development attention for rural schools included lack of the human, fiscal, community, and professional development resources frequently available in metropolitan schools; inadequate teacher preparation for rural teaching; differing administrative roles and responsibilities; differing staff relationships; unique personal and learning characteristics of rural students; rural population increases; inadequate preparation for technology; and inability to duplicate metropolitan education in rural areas. The committee recommended that research and development for rural areas focus on finance, staff training and attrition, population trends, and access to information. (SB)

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REPORT

OF

RURAL EDUCATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE

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September 1983

RC014457

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INTRODUCTION

The discussion of research and development needs for rural schools has been prevalent for decades. Current and sustained interest in this topic makes it possible for those people who live, work and send their children to school in rural areas to believe that rural education remains viable, and that perhaps, a major nationwide effort will soon respond to their needs Rural people, regardless of how one defines "rural," have a fierce pride in their schools; in fact, they believe that rural schools may hold some of the answers to our nation's social problems. The Honorable Albert Quie, Governor of Minnesota, addresses the issue of rural education:

> Despite improvements in education and advances in society, achievement scores are falling and society has more unsolved problems...The assets of rural education--full parent involvement, especially in the elementary grades, and community support (the kind where everybody turns out for a school dedication); and their emphasis upon hard work, generosity, discipline and cooperativeness--are strengths other schools should emulate...The future of the nation depends on the ability of our leadership to produce answers and solutions that avoid fads, that have the quality to make the world a safer place. We need to identify the educational experiences that encourage such leadership. I'm convinced that rural schools, where smallness forces us to take an interest in each other, know about some of the ingredients we need.

However, some rural people are beginning to lose hope. Though there is considerable discussion regarding the severity of the problems they face, rural people see little effort being put into the solution of those problems. Members of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) Rural Education Advisory Committee expressed concern about those agencies with the power and ability to provide them with the much needed research and development resources. They felt that while those agencies may continue to talk about rural needs, they will more likely put their efforts into solving the more visible urban problems and perhaps, modify those solutions to meet rural needs.

SETTING THE PARAMETERS

In order to ensure that all committee members held common understandings and perceptions as to what would be discussed during the course of the meetings, it was agreed to first reach consensus on the characteristics of the rural school. Subsequent to that task, the committee agreed to identify the problems as they understand them and establish some guidelines for addresssing those problems.

In describing the "Rural School," the committee agreed to the following characteristics:

1. The rural school is outside the regular service boundaries of a metropolitan area. That is, rural schools do not generally receive the same types of services as would be expected in an area such as Portland, Oregon, Yakima, Washington, or Boise, Idaho. Generally speaking, this was considered to be at least 50 miles from a major urban area.

2. The rural school averages no more than one classroom per grade level, K-12, at a single school site. There may be more than one school site in the district, but all sites would be at least this small. (However, fluctuations in population may cause a school to have more than one section at a grade level on occasion.)

3. The rural school is blocked from a metropolitan service area by a geographic barrier such as a mountain range or an ocean, or it is periodically blocked by some climactic condition such as snow or ice, or it is isolated due to the lack of regular and reliable public transportation.

4. The rural school is defined as Rural, Remote, Isolated, or Small by the laws of the state in which it is located.

It was agreed that schools to be considered by the committee as rural would have at least two of the characteristics.

The committee also expressed an interest in identifying a set of beliefs as to why "Rural Schools" should be given specific and individual attention by the R&D community. The following statements make up this rationale:

1. Rural schools frequently lack the resources which are often key ingredients in R&D findings when conducted in metropolitan areas:

   a. Human Resources

      Educational Specialists

      For example, R&D suggests that science programs be provided with specialists to assist teachers in teaching techniques and the ordering and organizing of equipment and materials for science instruction. Rural schools often don't have the personnel to do this.

      Experiential Diversity in the Community

      For example, R&D suggests that specialized experts in the community be called upon to bring reality into the classroom. Many

rural schools don't have access to such human resources as the community often represents a single industry or function.

b. Fiscal Resources

Specialized Facilities and Equipment

For example, R&D suggests that a chemistry program will be more effective if the course is taught in a facility which has specialized equipment. However, such a facility would have limited use in a small school. Therefore, this type of R&D finding is not appropriate to the rural school.

Tax Resources to Pay for Higher Per Pupil Costs such as Transportation, Special Instruction

R&D suggests that resources be directed into those activities which have highest potential for producing quality instruction. Rural schools often find much of their resources must go into such activities as bussing, which probably does not directly lead to quality instruction.

c. Community Resources

Health Services

R&D suggests that healthy students make better learners. Many rural schools have no access or limited access to health services.

Community Service Organizations

Some studies have found that supporting service agencies helps schools better meet student needs by emphasizing community activities and student achievement. Many rural schools do not have access to such community service organizations.

Diversified Business and Industry

R&D indicates that the more experience young people have with the world of work, the more meaningful classroom learning experiences will be. In many rural areas there may be a single business or industry or none.

Reliable Public Transportation

Student experiences outside the classroom can be augmented by bringing people and programs to the schools, or by taking students on field trips. However, reliable transportation to support such programs is frequently not available in rural areas, and often very expensive.

Public or Private Libraries

R&D suggests that libraries are a key element in the learning process. In many rural areas there are no libraries, or bookmobiles.

d. Professional Development Resources

Colleges or Universities

R&D suggests that teachers keep abreast of the newest and best techniques to provide quality instruction. Many teachers in rural schools have limited or no access to colleges or universities.

Consultants

R&D products are often disseminated to educators through consultants. Because of the size and remoteness of many rural schools, consultants seldom reach these areas.

Inservice Leaders

R&D suggests that strong inservice programs be provided to teachers for professional growth. Rural schools often have difficulty getting qualified personnal for inservice programs.

Professional Networks

R&D recommends the development of professional networks to share current techniques and materials. The remoteness of rural schools makes it difficult to develop such networks. In addition, many professional organizations have interests in urban issues and are not capable of providing a forum for rural concerns.

2. Instruction is generally delivered in ways unique to the rural area; in addition, teachers are usually trained to teach in metropolitan settings. Therefore, most teachers are not prepared to:

   a. Teach multiple grades at the same time--often four or more grades in a single classroom

   b. Teach multiple subject areas to multiple grade levels

   c. Teach with limited instructional resources and/or localized instructional materials

3. Administrative roles and responsibilities in rural schools are different in that:

   a. Administrators often have closer, more personal contacts with community members.

   b. Administrators often have closer relationships with staff members due to the small size of the school.

   c. Administrators often have multiple assignments such as:

      Superintendent, Principal, Curriculum Specialist, Business Manager, Transportation Manager, Public Relations Manager.

4. Staff members usually have closer, more personal relationships with:

   a. Each other--they often live in the same small community and are neighbors, friends and relatives as well as professional colleagues.

   b. Students--because of the smaller number of students, relationships between teachers and students frequently become personal friendships; smaller communities often bring students and teachers together during social events and informal occasions.

   c. Parents--living in a small community often means that the teacher is under close scrutiny; personal and professional behavior is more easily observed.

   d. Systematized and bureaucratic structures common to large districts are minimal or absent, therefore:

      Staff and students can devote energies to the relevant tasks of teaching and learning rather than diverting energy to coping with the system.

5. Rural students have personal and learning characteristics which are different from students living in metropolitan settings:

   a. Rural students frequently have a narrower range of experiences when they start school. They may also have fewer experiences as they go through their school years, due to the limitations of smaller communities.

   b. Rural students often have fewer acquaintances, who may also have the same limited experiences.

   c. Rural students may have a smaller knowledge base due to their limited experiences.

   d. Rural students often have more focused interests as their lives center primarily on the human and economic characteristics of their community.

   e. Because rural students frequently lack exposure to mainstream American culture, or their understandings may be distorted due to media exposure untampered by personal experience, standard curriculum materials reflective of this culture will probably not meet their needs.

   f. Rural students are sometimes members of ethnic or linguistic minority groups, and materials designed for urban minorities (e.g., Sesame Street) will not necessarily be relevant to rural minorities.

6. There is a trend for a portion of the population to leave the metropolitan areas and return to the "good" rural life. Implications derived from this fact include:

   a. More teachers will need to be trained to teach and live in rural areas; there will be increasing demand for teachers who can teach math, science, special education and talented and gifted.

   b. There will be increasing numbers of people requiring and demanding research on rural education to guarantee rural students receive quality instruction.

   c. There is a growing potential for serious conflict related to rural schooling between "Old Timers" and "New Comers" as the movement from metropolitan areas to rural areas escalates.

7. Rapid growth in knowledge and technology does not always extend into rural areas. Implications derived from this fact include:

   a. New knowledge and technology are often not reflected in the curriculum. Therefore, students may be deprived of those educational opportunities necessary for success in adult life.

b. Instructional staff may not be familiar with the new knowledge and technology; they may not use or be familiar with new tools and techniques in technology education. Therefore, students may be seriously limited in their educational experiences.

8. It is not known if the educational goals for people living in rural and metropolitan areas are the same, yet R&D efforts are similar for both communities. At present, there has been only limited research to define the unique characteristics of each geographic area. Until more data are obtained, informed decisions cannot be made. Decisions based on limited data can be detrimental or, at best, wasteful of resources. Many current R&D efforts focus almost exclusively on the urban setting. For example, the work being done to implement the research on effective schooling and leadership skills for school principals is based primarily on metropolitan data.

9. There is evidence to suggest that some very positive aspects of education often result from ways in which rural schools are operated. However, without reliable research data, these results cannot be replicated in metropolitan settings.

In formulating the beliefs contained in the rationale, both positive and negative aspects of rural education were included. The committee felt a concise statement of <u>all</u> significant areas to be studied was important in persuading the educational research community to put some of their efforts into rural schooling issues. As suggested in statement No. 9, there may be some generalizable benefits to the entire educational system of the nation if more were known about "rural schools."

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT NEEDS

This section contains information relative to the needs, issues and concerns which the committee members identified as needing attention by the educational research community.

Five areas of concern were identified by the committee. Listed under each are some of the specifics in need of attention.

1. Finance

   a. Stabilization of Revenue--most rural schools have a very small tax base, or one which is controlled by a limited number of people. Therefore, any fluctuation in the economy of a rural area causes dramatic increases or decreases in the revenue available for operation of schools or for capital bonds. There is a need to study ways to level out these fluctuations, thus making long range planning more feasible.

b. Professional pay--salary levels need to be competitive and acceptable to professionals if the rural school is to attract appropriately qualified staff. Often, this is difficult to achieve due to unstable funding. Local boards and community members also tend to believe that teachers should be paid on a par with the average worker in the community. A definite need exists to study ways in which to equalize salary levels for rural teachers with salary levels for teachers in urban areas.

c. Access to technology--limited financial bases often make it hard for rural schools to keep up with advancements in technology, especially when expensive equipment is involved. Yet much of the available technology, when used as an effective part of the instructional program, can play a critical role in meeting student needs. There is an explicit need to study ways in which rural schools can acquire and use the new technology.

d. Equity--a limited number of students needing specialized attention in order to receive an equitable educational program often means that attending to these needs is a major financial concern of rural schools. Some programs for sharing specialized instructors and/or facilities have been developed but only on a limited basis. The majority of students with specialized needs tends to be overlooked. It is critical that new and innovative models be developed for districts to use in serving the needs of these students.

2. Staff Training

a. Undergraduate students who are considering teaching in rural schools need specialized training. In addition to course work directly related to the rural school, undergraduate students need practical experience in rural school settings. There is a clear need for research to define the characteristic elements of rural school training and how to effectively achieve practical experience.

b. Inservice for teachers in rural schools is a serious concern. At present, there is limited inservice available to professional educators in rural school settings.

c. Professional growth and renewal is another critical area for study. Frequently, the teacher in the rural school has little or no contact with anyone other than students, community members or other professional staff. There is little opportunity to discuss educational issues and innovations or to learn new techniques and procedures. For those teachers who do attend outside conferences or workshops, the material is often geared more to professionals in metropolitan settings. Studies need to be done to address and solve problems of professional growth and renewal for the rural school teacher.

3. Staff Attrition

   a. Rural school staff tends to be short term. That is, teachers usually remain on the job less than one year to no more than three years. There is urgent need for research to determine the reasons behind the high attrition rate and to identify some effective corrective measures, and thus mitigate the disruptive effect of high teacher turnover.

   b. In some cases, where school staff in rural schools is long term, a student may have one teacher for several years--sometimes for as many as eight. There is need for research to determine what effects this type of situation has on both teacher performance and student learning.

4. Population Trends

   a. Because the influx of three or four families into a rural school can seem as dramatic as the influx of thirty or forty families into a larger school, it is important that tools to use in projecting this growth or decline be developed.

   b. Since student fluctuation can be dramatic in the rural school, there needs to be some study as to the effects this phenomenon has on the instructional program.

   c. Many rural schools face periodic increases or decreases in the school population due to seasonal workers. As many schools frequently don't receive records on students from these families, it is difficult to prepare effective instructional programs. It is crucial that procedures for effectively transferring these records be reviewed and new procedures be developed to overcome this problem.

5. Access to Information

   a. Information on how problems are solved in metropolitan schools may be informative, but this type of information is often not useable in rural school settings. There is a need for a system to keep rural school people informed on issues, problems and solutions as they pertain to their unique situations and circumstances.

   b. In addition to a system for R&D specific to rural schools, there is a need to develop and implement a delivery system which will get the information to rural school people in a useful format and in a timely manner. The possibilities for using electronic data transmission, or some other form of telecommunications link such as that developed for Chief State School Officers should be closely examined.

THE RURAL EDUCATION ASSUMPTION

It was decided by the committee not to prioritize the needs, concerns and issues relative to rural schools as each school has its own set of unique characteristics. Instead, the committee chose to develop a set of assumptions about rural education which could be used by the educational R&D community in making decisions pertaining to the improvement of rural education. Following is the NWREL Rural Education Advisory Committee's Rural Education Assumption.

Excellence in the instructional program of all rural schools is the goal of those who work in these schools and those who send their children to these schools. Therefore, the NWREL Education Advisory Committee presents the following assumptions to those responsible for the design and conduct of educational research and development:

> Rural schools are unique in the following ways: 1) in their organization, 2) in the types of students and communities they serve, 3) in the demands they place on their professional staff, 4) in their financial affairs, 5) in the facilities they operate, 6) in their availability to information and services, 7) in the social problems they must address, 8) in the types of instructional materials they need and 9) in the instructional delivery system they use. For these reasons, there is an urgent need for sound research data specifically centered on the needs and problems of the rural school. There is an equally pressing need for an analysis of those data so processes, materials and techniques can be developed which can be implemented at the building level.

Questions the research community should address include:

Instruction

What are some effective designs or strategies for coping with conflicting values that occur between New Timers and Old Timers in a rural community?

What kinds of instructional delivery systems will increase the effectiveness of the instructional program and student learning?

Which instructional and classroom management techniques are effective in the multigrade classroom?

How can rural schools develop curriculum which is meaningful to students and acceptable to the community without using specialized personnel?

How can rural schools provide specialized facilities and instruction so students are not handicapped because they live in rural areas?

What are the actual differences, if any, in the achievement levels of rural vs. urban pupils as guaged by available measures common to both groups?

Technology

Can current, advancing technology be used in such a way to improve the delivery of instruction?

Can technology provide a means for more effectively managing the rural school?

Can technology provide a means for conducting useful and meaningful staff inservice?

Curriculum Materials

Commercial instructional materials frequently do not meet the learning needs of rural students. How should staff modify or supplement these materials?

Rural schools often do not have personnel with time or training to develop appropriate instructional materials. Where can rural schools get the necessary help?

Staff Development and Professional Support

What type of undergraduate or graduate training should be provided to students considering teaching in the rural school setting?

What type of training do rural school administrators need to more effectively screen candidates for positions in their schools?

Who can develop staff inservice and training tailored to meet the needs of the rural school?

How can meaningful staff development programs be provided to rural educators?

How can a rural school provide staff with opportunities for professional growth and support and with opportunities for interacting with others who have the same interests and needs?

Socialization

Since isolation is a problem which affects the professional staff as well as the students, and can result in a move away from rural areas, what are some effective ways to provide staff and students with broadening experiences and a variety of human interactions?

SUMMARY

The information included in this report was generated by educators from the States of Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Washington. The representatives on the committee were teachers, principals, superintendents, and professors of education from institutions which specialize in preparing personnel to work in rural schools. Each member of the committee is recognized as a highly respected professional with a unique ability to articulate the needs and problems of rural schools and work toward solving those problems. The goal of each committee member is achieving excellence in rural education.

The message which they deliver and documented throughout this report is:

> Rural schools, no matter how they are defined, are an important part of the public education process of the United States, and as such, they deserve at least a proportional share of attention by the educational research and development community.

APPENDIX

NWREL
RURAL EDUCATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE
MEETING
June 9-10, 1983
Portland, Oregon

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*Could not attend June 9-10, 1983 meeting

RURAL EDUCATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE
MEETING

AGENDA

June 9, 1983

9:00 A.M.	Welcome and Introductions
9:15 A.M.	Purpose of the Committee
9:30 A.M.	Warm-up Activity
10:00 A.M.	Current Research and Rural Schools--NWREL's Perspective
10:30 A.M.	BREAK
10:45 A.M.	Discussion of NWREL's Perspective
11:15 A.M.	Organizing for the Afternoon
11:45 A.M.	LUNCH
1:15 P.M.	Work Group Activity
2:00 P.M.	Group Presentations and Discussion
3:00 P.M.	BREAK
3:15 P.M.	New Work Group Activity
3:45 P.M.	Group Presentations and Discussion
4:40 P.M.	End of Day One

June 10, 1983

9:00 A.M.	Review of Day One
9:15 A.M.	Prioritizing Work from Day One
10:15 A.M.	BREAK
10:30 A.M.	Planning Procedures for Confirmation of Priority Needs by Other Practitioners
11:15 A.M.	Looking at Next Steps for the Committee and NWREL
12:00 Noon	End Committee Meeting